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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Dress

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Abstract

The wealth and competitive elegance involved in fashionable dress in particular, were truly symbolic of the growing culture of refined sociability, luxury and consumerism. Fashion became a form of social communication: a means by which to impress one's social circle and gain their admiration. Dress was a means of public exposure, a visual and imitable symbol of rank, wealth and refinement, which in its imitation, and as a result frequently changing and extreme styles, was met with ridicule and yet a fervent social demand.

Fashion, much like its influence today, played a central role in the development of Enlightenment sociability. A person's dress was used to establish rank, cement social

relationships, generate friendship and social gossip, and even indicate political allegiance. The wealth and competitive elegance involved in fashionable dress in particular, were truly symbolic of the growing culture of refined sociability, luxury and consumerism.

According to Neil McKendrick, 'Fashion was the key used by many commentators to explain the forces of social imitation, social emulation, class competition and emulative spending'. McKendrick refers to Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (1723), suggesting he 'recognized that elegant clothes could serve as an overt statement of social superiority'.¹ In February 1731 *The Gentleman's Magazine* wrote, 'By the fashion, figure, and colour of the cloaths, we may form a judgment of the sentiments and qualities of the mind'.² Likewise, for Oliver Goldsmith, 'dress has a mechanical influence upon the mind, and we naturally are awed into respect and esteem at the elegance of those, whom even our reason would teach us to contemn'.³ Dress not only offered a visual symbol of rank and wealth, but could also emanate taste, allow the wearer an air of refinement, or even distinguish one from the fashionable competition.

However, the problem with establishing visual indicators is that they are easily emulated. In her study of women's clothing in the eighteenth century, Jennie Batchelor warns that fashion presented a threat to the social hierarchy, as 'both a means of self-expression and a potential facilitator of false self-creation'.⁴ For women in particular their choice of dress was accused of being calculated, chosen to show off their best features, or simply to compete with other similarly ranked ladies. So while dressing oneself could be a creative endeavour, it came with a necessity for social awareness. The skill of revealing and concealing what one seemed fit to do in particular social company meant that certain modes of fashionable attire were established, especially at court and other public events, and these were always reflective of the individual's social rank and wealth. With dress intrinsically linked to the concept of sociability, particularly for women, creativity and fashion were at the height of social sophistication.

Ahead of particular social events, wealthier women would send invitations for private viewings to show off any new fashionable investments and to gauge the competition – to be the best dressed was paramount.⁵ However, with the increasing availability of new and exciting fashions accompanying the century's commercial and economic growth, those in positions of influence (and with the wealth to experiment with different styles) had to make each dress more elaborate than the last, and as fashions inevitably tired, the once highly sought designs quickly passed into second-hands. As new gowns replaced the old, these were handed down or sold on, meaning the markets were saturated with luxury garments and accessories, albeit at least a season behind, at almost affordable prices.

This was becoming a growing concern, and the first edition of *The Ladies Library* (1714), in the chapter on 'Dress', suggests that rank has become almost indistinguishable through the imitation of fashion :

‘Men and Women should content themselves with that sort of Clothing which agrees with their Sex and Condition, not striving to exceed or equal that of a higher Rank, nor raise Envy in their own. What Difference is there now between the Dress of a *Citizen* and a *Courtier*, of a *Taylor* and a *Gentleman*, of a *Servant* and a *Master*? The *Maid* is very often mistaken for the *Mistress*, and the *Valet* for *my Lord*.’⁶

On this topic, Batchelor quotes Mandeville that at the lower end of the social spectrum, the ‘poorest labourer’s wife [...] half-starve[s] her self and her husband’ to purchase a ‘second-hand gown and petticoat’ and, to keep up momentum, ‘women of quality’, ‘frightened to see merchants’ wives and daughters dressed like themselves’, contrive new ‘modes’ to distinguish themselves, thereby starting the fashion cycle again.’ (Batchelor 7) Indeed, as Jessica Munns and Penny Richards suggest, the availability of luxury garments on the second-hand markets, often handed down to servants, or worse, stolen from mistresses’ houses, ‘merely accelerated the rate of change: whereas styles used to alter by the decade, then annually, by the end of the century they were altering on a monthly basis – in time, new less easily copied criteria of elegance had to be invented’.⁷

This is one of the reasons that eighteenth-century fashions became a feat of expense and extremity – fuelled by a need to distinguish oneself not only from the lower classes, but also from one’s peers. According to Hannah Greig, ‘Wearing appropriate dress was an essential passport for access, and the clothing demanded by court events followed specific protocols. [...] Personal bills and household accounts reveal the staggering expense that could be incurred to equip a person for regular attendance at court.’ (Greig 115–116) Writing in *Times* (1789), Kerr and Co. Embroiderers to the Royal Family,

‘[...] respectfully beg leave to recommend to the Ladies, the Regency Bandeaux, Coronet, and Star, for the Head Dress and Trimmings; also the Versailles Sashes, Buttons for Dresses, &c. which from the novelty of the Designs, masterly style they are executed in, the dignity they add to the dress, the becoming grace and elegance they give to the FAIR SEX, is beautiful beyond description. – Ladies may have the Sashes painted, plain, or in colours. – Patterns drawn and paintings for embroidery. [...] Rich Patterns for Gentlemen’s Suits of Embroidery, a Variety of embroidered Dress and Frock Waistcoats, figured Velvets, Sattins, Vigonias, Beavers, Ratteens, plain and striped Cloths, and every other Article for Dress.’⁸

Advertisements such as these for tailors and embroiders suggest that luxury and craftsmanship were the distinguishing factors for a person’s quality of dress, and therefore their social standing.

As fashionable dress became ever more involved with wealth and visual spectacle, it moved further away from the reaches of the lower ranks, and even stretched the pockets of Dukes and Duchesses (Greig 116). Corsets got tighter, waists got smaller, skirts got bigger, fabrics

were more expensive and elaborately embroidered, silks, velvets and lace were a standard at court, fine headdresses and jewellery could add yet more luxury to the final image, and the bigger the hair, the better (Greig 115–121). As luxury fashion was a growing expectation for many social circles, particularly at court, forming a distinctive look, and out-doing last season's gowns, now on the backs of the working classes, demanded a constant monetary expense and continual social assessment of the latest fashions and those items gracing the astringed bodies of the most stylish women.

Much like celebrities today, people in a position of influence could direct the next fashionable trends. Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire for example, is said to have popularised the ostrich-feather headdress and extravagant towering hairstyles.⁹ According to Hannah Greig, the Countess of Strafford, in a bid to gain favour with Queen Anne, designed a dress covered in diamonds and gold trim, and 'had the most jewels of anybody there.' (Greig 120) It is clear that as the upper end of the social hierarchy clambered to distinguish itself from the lower, it also sparked internal competition.

While the idea of dressing one's person to match their rank and distinguish their refinement within sociable company was the appeal of fashion, somewhere in its extremity the individual was lost. As Richard Campbell notes in *The London Tradesman* (1747):

'There are Numbers of Beings in about this Metropolis who have no other identical Existence than what the Taylor, Milliner, and Perriwig-Maker bestow upon them: Strip them of these Distinctions, and they are quite a different Species of Beings; have no more Relation to their dressed selves, than they have to the Great *Mogul*, and are as insignificant in Society as Punch, deprived of his moving Wires, and hung upon a Peg.'¹⁰

While it could be argued that dress created a visually legible statement of the individual and how they chose to adorn their body, in reality, judging the quality of a person's character from their dress, particularly if it was second-hand, was not entirely straightforward.

The Gentleman's Magazine, however, offered some advice on the subject:

'As Dress has a strong Influence on the Mind, so it shews the Temper and Disposition of the Person wearing it; those who appear fondest of a *shewing and glittering Outside*, are commonly of weak Minds, vain, empty, and effeminate. When People imagine they shall be respected the more for the Cut of a *Sleeve*, the Tuck of a *Sword*, the Tail of a *Wig*, the Trimming of a *Coat*, or the Clock of a *Stocking*, it is evident their sole Merit is derived from the *Taylor, Milliner, Barber*, or some other inferior *Mechanick*. [...] But not

designing to treat particularly of Mens Dress, he proceeds to remind the *fair Sex*, that however they may shine in *Brocade* and *Diamonds*, *Modesty* is their brightest and most valuable *Ornament*.¹¹

The moral standpoint against such flamboyant expense and ‘*glittering*’ was at once a gentle reminder of the necessity for virtue and modesty to accompany one's clothing, but also a forewarning against forming ideas of respect and taste – two crucial factors of Enlightenment sociability – based on something as immaterial, and as easily imitated, as dress.

1. Neil McKendrick, ‘Commercialization of Fashion’, in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (eds), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982), p. 34–99, p. 52.
2. [Anon.], ‘Grub Street Journal’, in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (11 February 1731, no. 58), p. 56–57.
3. Oliver Goldsmith, *The Life of Beau Nash* (London: J. Newbery, 1762), p. 10.
4. Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3.
5. See Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 119.
6. [Anon.], *The Ladies Library, Written by a Lady. Published by Mr. Steele*, vol. 1 of 3 (London: Jacob Tonson, 1714), p. 45.
7. Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (eds), ‘Introduction’ in *The Clothes that Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), p. 9–32, p. 23. Munns and Richards note: ‘The clothes were, perhaps, not always given. Perusal of the criminal records of the eighteenth century reveal a large number of cases in which employers accuse their servants of stealing their clothing’ (p. 32). See J. C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), p. 117–119, and John Harvey, *Men in Black* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
8. [Advertisement], ‘New Fashion Dress, no. 28, St. James's Street’, in *Times*, Friday 6 February (London, 1789).
9. Amanda Foreman, ‘Cavendish, Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire (1757–1806)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) online edn, accessed via: (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4934>).
10. Richard Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (London: T. Gardner, 1747), p. 191.
11. [Anon.], ‘Of Dress and Modesty’ in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (25 September 1731, no. 155), p. 388–389.

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Further Reading

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